

Documenting the Maya Textile Tradition: Recent Work in Venustiano Carranza & Alta Verapaz

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Bonampak murals, Late Classic Period 800 A.D., Antonio Tejada Fonseca painting. (Right) Detailed drawing of court lady from Bonampak mural by Kees Grootenboer.⁽¹⁾

The Maya mural "Ladies of the Court" at Bonampak, Chiapas, Mexico, includes an elite woman dressed in a long, white, sheer, brocaded *huipil* (a tunic that falls from the shoulders).⁽²⁾ Recent fieldwork indicates that descendants of the Maya in a few remote locations still practice a very similar backstrap weaving style.⁽³⁾

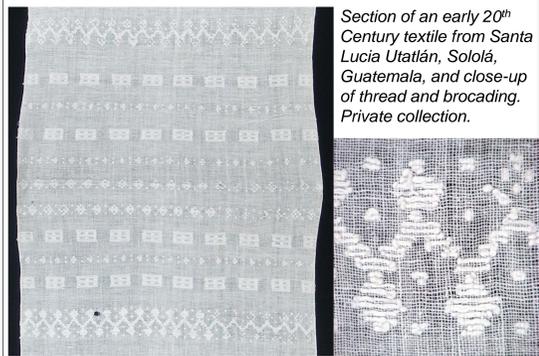
Sheer woven cloth (which is based on the use of finely spun thread in a balanced, spaced weave) was only one of many weaving styles practiced by the Classic Maya, and brocading only one of many decorative techniques employed. A continuous tradition of any backstrap weaving style cannot be traced through actual textile samples due to the humid climate of Mesoamerica and the natural fragility of fiber. Clear evidence exists, however, from imprints on pottery, stone carvings, scenes painted on ceramics and walls, and a few fiber fragments from burials or a sacred well, proving that Classic Maya women were among the world's greatest textile producers.⁽⁴⁾

Textile fragments from the Rio Azul excavation site (which carbon-14 analysis of adjacent wood fragments ascribed to the late Fifth Century) have been compared by Robert Carlsen to the *pikb'il* style of weaving practiced today by Q'eqchi'-speaking Maya weavers in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, in which a sheer, balanced plain weave is decorated with small brocade designs.⁽⁵⁾ A similar style called *petete* is woven by Tzotzil-speaking Maya weavers in Venustiano Carranza, Chiapas, Mexico.⁽⁶⁾ The style is also found in early 20th Century collections of textiles from other areas populated by the Maya.⁽⁷⁾

Weaving implements depicted in the Florentine Codex (Fray Bernardino de Sahagún) are essentially the same as those used by the Maya today: backstrap and cords, stick spindle and whirl, spinning bowl, weaving pick and sticks for the backstrap loom.⁽⁸⁾

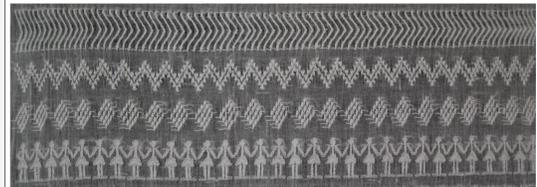
While continuity in technique and material can be documented through nearly two millennia, the same cannot be inferred about the meaning of the symbols on textiles. Symbolic meaning is fluid and changes with individual weavers and over time. It is not only impossible to know with certainty what specific designs or symbols meant on ancient textiles, but the meaning ascribed by weavers today can differ within a given community.⁽⁹⁾

Today, no more than 10 weavers in Venustiano Carranza and approximately 40 scattered in rural Alta Verapaz use backstrap looms to produce the sheer, white, spaced-woven cloth with small, white, brocaded designs, a style remembered from their ancestors.⁽¹⁰⁾

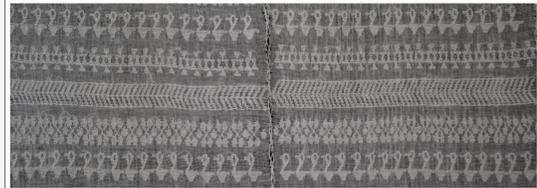


Section of an early 20th Century textile from Santa Lucia Utatlán, Sololá, Guatemala, and close-up of thread and brocading. Private collection.

Venustiano Carranza and Alta Verapaz are geographically located within the land originally populated by the Maya, and are on or near limestone folds in the earth, which formed caves and underground waterways, important features in the ancient Maya belief system.⁽¹¹⁾ These two locations are 180 miles apart as the crow flies, and more than 12 hours apart by van transport over roads that skirt communities well known for completely different backstrap weaving styles (Tactic, San Cristóbal Verapaz, Aguacatán, San Juan Cotzal, Nebaj, San Rafael, and Huehuetenango, to name a few).⁽¹²⁾



Sheer balanced plain weave textiles from Venustiano Carranza, Chiapas, Mexico (above), and from Alta Verapaz, Guatemala (below), both have small supplementary weft brocade designs.



Venustiano Carranza, Chiapas Mexico⁽¹³⁾

The municipal district of Venustiano Carranza is located in the tropical lowlands of the Grijalva Valley in southern Mexico. The largest town, also called Venustiano Carranza (but known as San Bartolomé de los Llanos until 1934), sits on the side of an extinct volcano rising up from the hot valley. Tzotzil-speaking weavers there, and in the nearby town of Paraiso del Grijalva on the flatland, produce the sheer elegant cloth. When the weaving is done with fine hand-spun thread, it is called *petete*. When thicker commercial thread is used, whether white or color, it is called "Carranza-style." These indigenous weavers are unique in Chiapas for tailoring their backstrap-loomed cloth into European-style clothing.⁽¹⁴⁾

Tailored Carranza-style and *petete* shirts are worn by Tzotzil men to festivals and religious events. Local women wear Carranza-style blouses, now often in color, on a more regular basis. Many brocade designs used in *petete* are not gender specific.

The Tzotzil Maya of Venustiano Carranza have endured many centuries of land disputes with ladinos, as well as other indigenous groups.⁽¹⁵⁾ Weaving is seen as an income generating activity untied to land ownership.

Petete cloth weavers sell through a buyer from the Sna Jolobil weavers' cooperative in Chiapas. According to the weavers, the buyer resells hand-spun shawls in Mexico City to wealthy upper class women or to Europeans at double the 7,000 peso (\$500) price they are paid.

Weavers in Venustiano Carranza use a wide loom to produce a textile of approximately 27 inches by up to 76 inches. Such wide looms were documented during Colonial times and are still used in some indigenous communities elsewhere in southern Mexico and highland Guatemala.

Handspun *petete* cloth is now woven by only a few weavers. A far greater number in Venustiano Carranza today weave Carranza-style,



An elderly participant in a religious festival wears a hand-spun shirt.



Rosario Gomez Espinoza and her daughters wear a variety of Carranza-style blouses made from commercial thread. She also spins and weaves *petete*-style cloth. Her first husband was killed in a land dispute in the 1980s, along with nine others.

with commercially blended and polished white and colored yarns, which produces a heavier, shinier weave.

State and national folk art contests with large cash prizes are offered to support the indigenous culture, and greatly increase a few weavers' incomes.⁽¹⁶⁾ Such contests also change the traditional craft in unexpected ways.

Government scholarships available to indigenous students allow academically inclined youth—including daughters of *petete* weavers—to leave behind the backstrap loom and become chemists and engineers. Jeans and tee shirts or school uniforms are often the preferred attire for the young in Tzotzil families. Continued competition and strife over land plots for growing traditional indigenous food, such as crops of corn, beans and squash, and the influx of televisions, the Internet, popular magazines and western food also influence the young to look to the globalized economy for future economic security and sustenance.



This dress was woven by María Luisa Mendoza Vazquez for her daughter's 15th birthday. Made of fine handspun, hand dyed thread with enlarged traditional designs, the dress was entered into a government-sponsored contest. It placed second because a judge said María should have also woven a matching shawl for the outfit.

Alta Verapaz, Guatemala⁽¹⁷⁾

Alta Verapaz is a highland mountainous area that was for centuries cut off from other areas by belligerent groups, adjacent highland desert, steamy jungle areas, and rough karst mountains.⁽¹⁸⁾ The climate of the cloud forest areas where *pikb'il* is most often woven is moderate and often moist, unusual for such a light *huipil* material.

Pikb'il is only one of several styles woven by Q'eqchi' weavers in Cobán, San Juan Chamelco and San Pedro Carchá.⁽¹⁹⁾ It is, however, the most elegant. Other styles are gauze weaves, sometimes interspersed with rows of plain weave with *pikb'il* brocaded designs, or variations on heavy, colorful brocades originating in nearby Tactic and Tamuhú. *Pikb'il* weavers are generally poor, illiterate, and monolingual, with pressing needs to earn money for their children's school fees and for medicine. Only a few *pikb'il* weavers today see the ancient weaving style as an important connection to their culture.

Huipil panels woven in the last six years measure 14-15 inches wide by 46-49 inches long. A *huipil* is formed by joining three panels and cutting out an area for the neck. The neck and sleeve tops are

sometimes embroidered. Panels intended for table runners, shawls or scarves for the outside market measure up to 20 inches wide.

The only printed patterns of *pikb'il* designs for weavers found to date are in a manual for textiles intended for the Japanese market.⁽²⁰⁾ The designs are greatly enlarged and are to be woven with metallic thread, which may influence future *pikb'il* weaving styles. Young Maya girls already show a preference for shirt yardage that includes metallic thread. A fine, unmercerized, 100% white commercial cotton (size 20/1) is used for sheer *pikb'il* weaving.⁽²¹⁾ A weaver can make two to three *huipiles* with one pound of thread, which costs 22-25 quetzales per pound (approximately \$3.00).

Pikb'il was originally woven in Alta Verapaz for *huipiles*. It is now also woven for sale items destined for outside the indigenous communities. *Pikb'il huipiles* are still worn by some Q'eqchi' women to religious ceremonies in Cobán and San Juan Chamelco, and occasionally in the nearby town of Tactic. It is not, however, worn on an everyday basis by the vast majority of weavers in Alta Verapaz because it is considered expensive in time and material, and is hard to keep clean compared to cheap synthetic cloth offered in markets.



Most weavers no longer wear *pikb'il*, but try to sell it outside their community for 300-400 quetzales (\$37-50); more, if embroidered.

The lack of funds for education within the family or from the government, the scarcity of educational facilities in rural areas, and the lack of other than menial jobs outside the indigenous communities lead many girls to see weaving as the only activity they can do to bring in money, whether or not they eventually marry.

The fact that *pikb'il* style weaving even continues today is noteworthy. The Q'eqchi' of Samac and Sanimtacá, as well as other indigenous areas of Alta Verapaz, suffered greatly during the recent 36-year Civil War. Many were forced to flee massacres with only the clothes on their backs, and hid in steep wooded areas for years. Most left behind all their possessions, including their looms.⁽²²⁾ A whole generation of females did not learn the art of weaving at their mothers' knees, but rather picked up the skill as adults because it remains almost the only economic activity available to them.

Pikb'il weaving is a quiet activity. The batten is used to gently tamp down each weft, rather than bang down the weft with force.



Footnote reference sheets are available from the presenter.

Endangered Threads Documentaries (ETD) is a 501(c)(3) educational nonprofit. The following people contributed to the fieldwork in Chiapas and Alta Verapaz: anthropologists Margot Blum Schevill and Barbara Knoke de Arathoon, linguist Mario Chocooj, ETD interns Cheryl Guerrero and Callie Vandewiele, Peace Corps Volunteers Jonathan Tharin, Cortney Jordan, Andrew McAfee and Leo Bentley, and ETD founders Paul and Kathleen Vitale. Raymond Senuk, Walter "Chip" Morris, Janet Schwartz, Liz Frey and Gabrielle Vail also contributed. Photos are by Janet Schwartz, Raymond Senuk, Callie Vandewiele and Kathleen Vitale. The 2010 research trip was partially funded by a donation from Luis and Kate Leiva.